

Middle East Policy Council

Book Review

The Invention of the Jewish People

Shlomo Sand. Translated by Yael Lotan.

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When I visited Greece in the summer of 2000, that state was in the midst of a heated debate about its national identity, closely tied historically to its national religion. Indeed, about 97 percent of Greece's native-born population is baptized into the Orthodox Church, which sees itself as the true guardian of Greek identity and traditions. But, in 2000, the European Union (EU) — Greece has been a member since 1981 — was putting pressure on the Greeks to follow in the footsteps of the secular members of the EU and take the historic step of accentuating the non-religious elements of its national identity.

The constitution of Greece recognizes the Greek Orthodox faith as the “prevailing” religion of the country; in fact, the blue canton in the upper hoist-side corner of the Greek national flag bears a white cross that symbolizes Greek Orthodoxy. And while the constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief for all, Greek citizens had for years carried government identity cards that stated their religion. So, by the end of the twentieth century, Brussels was demanding that Athens remove “religion” from the government's identity card.

During my visit, the debate over religion was reaching a climax of sorts. One Greek newspaper editorialized that Greece was experiencing “a profound identity crisis as it wrestles with what it means to be Greek, fundamental ties between church and state, and how Greek traditions fit in with the rest of Europe.”

An American Jewish tourist from Marin County, California, whom I met at a hotel in Athens, was furious. “Could you imagine American citizens being required to carry government identity cards that name their religion?” she asked during one of our breakfasts. “And Greece is one of our closest allies,” she noted. I surprised her when I mentioned that Israeli citizens also have to carry official identity cards that identify their religion and nationality. “But I thought that Israel was very much like us,” she responded.

I recalled that exchange after reading Shlomo Sand's *The Invention of the Jewish People*, a study of Jewish historiography that has ignited a lot of interest and some controversy in Israel and abroad. Sand, a professor of history at Tel Aviv University, challenges the biblical and conventional history of the Jewish people. He attempts to prove that Israeli Jews as well as those Jews who are citizens of other states are not the direct descendants of the ancient people who inhabited the Kingdom of Judea during the First and Second Temple period but include peoples that converted to Judaism during the course of history, mostly in the Mediterranean Basin and its periphery.

Countering official Zionist historiography, Sand questions whether the Jewish People ever existed as a national group with a common origin in the Land of Israel/Palestine. He concludes that the Jews should be seen as a religious community comprising a mishmash of individuals and groups that had converted to the ancient monotheistic religion but do not have any historical right to establish an independent Jewish state in the Holy Land. In short, the Jewish People, according to Sand, are not really a “people” in the sense of having a common ethnic origin and national heritage. They certainly do not have a political claim over the territory that today constitutes Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories, including Jerusalem.

An intellectual committed to the secular and liberal traditions of the West, Sand criticizes the Zionist historians and ideologues — he suggests that Zionist historians *are* ideologues — who introduced a mythical conception of the Jewish People as an ancient race. He charges them with racist thinking. “Today, if anyone dares to suggest that those who are considered Jews in the world ... have never constituted and still do not constitute a people or a nation — he is immediately condemned as a hater of Israel,” Sand writes. He contrasts the Zionist dogma that legitimizes the classification of Israeli Jews as members of the Jewish “religion” and “nation” in the government's identity cards with “civic” or “contractual” nationalism. This latter concept, developed by Enlightenment philosophers like John Locke, defines the nation as an association of people with equal and shared political rights and allegiance to similar political procedures. This sort of civic nationalism excludes religious, racial and even ethnic origins from the definition of the collective identity of Americans or, for that matter, the French and other Western societies. It is celebrated by liberal American-Jews (and non-Jews) like the one I met in Athens in 2000. They recognize that any attempt to impose a more exclusive definition on American identity that reflects the white, Anglo-Saxon and Protestant origin of the founders would result in the political and cultural marginalization of American Jews.

But, as Sand demonstrates in his study, the ideology of Zionism is exclusivist — having more in common with the kind of “organic” (or romantic) nationalism under which the collective identity of the nation is based on a mix of language, race, culture, religion and customs of the “people.” It excludes those who do not share them. An ideology of organic nationalism, reflected in the work of German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder, had an enormous influence on the nationalist movements of Eastern and Central Europe as well as the Balkans. Zionism was clearly a product of that kind of organic nationalism, a popular intellectual trend in Vienna at the end of the nineteenth century, where Theodor Herzl, the founder of the Zionist movement, was trying to “invent,” or more likely to reinvent, the Jewish People and create a national mythology. According to this story line, Sand writes, the people “who wandered across seas and continents, reached the ends of the earth and finally, with the advent of Zionism, made a U-turn and returned en masse to their orphaned homeland.”

Is the development of that specific national mythology very different from those embraced by other national movements in Europe (and later in the Third World)? They fantasized about a lost Golden Age through which they could invent a grand historical narrative to help mobilize their people to action against the “other” — foreign occupiers and enemies — and provide political legitimacy for the establishment of a separate nation-state. In truth, contemporary Greeks and Germans are no more the descendants of, respectively, the ancient Greeks or the Teutonic tribes than Israeli Jews are the offspring of the Biblical Hebrews.

As a materialist who attaches more importance to the role of “real” political and economic factors in shaping history — as opposed to the ideologies that they produce and that leaders use as instruments to advance their interests — I am a bit skeptical about the power of ideologies or national myths to transform reality. Therefore, I find Sand’s preoccupation with the topic less than useful and some of his historical research less than convincing. He does not really prove that the Ashkenazi Jews are the descendants of the population of the kingdom of Khazaria, who converted to Judaism in the Middle Ages. And his dismissal of new genetic studies that try to trace the ethnic origins of contemporary Jews (and other peoples) is not persuasive.

At the end of the day, the successes and failures of various national movements are determined by political and economic forces. Hence, notwithstanding their inspired national myths, the Basques and the Kurds have yet to win political independence, something that the people of Panama, a superficial entity created by the United States, have achieved. In the case of Zionism, it was the rise of anti-Semitism in Eastern and Central Europe and the ensuing Jewish Holocaust, coupled with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the British occupation of the Middle East that made the creation of a Jewish state possible.

Without buying into Sand’s entire thesis, one could recognize (as I do) the devastation that Zionism and Israel have inflicted on the Palestinian people and endorse a post-Zionist vision of Israel under which it would become a state of all its citizens by embracing a more liberal conception of its collective identity, including by eliminating the archaic classification of religion and nationalism in Israeli identity cards. I will not be surprised, when Israelis and Palestinians resolve their conflict and create the foundations for new political entities and identities, if they also end up inventing new national myths to legitimize their projects.